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# Which way African Librarianship?

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## Abstract

African Librarianship introduced since the mid-sixties has failed to make a significant impact in society or offer a meaningful contribution to national development. The paper critiques reasons offered by leading librarians and Academicians for this poor performance, which casts the blame on external factors. It is argued that among the crucial problems which have to be addressed are the failure of librarianship to adapt to African conditions, and internal weaknesses within African librarianship, and a failure by most Library Schools to offer training appropriate to African needs. The author argues that an effective strategy for the rehabilitation of African Librarianship should involve developing a different framework for analysing its problems. A combination of measures is called for including linking Africa's indigenous knowledge resources with exogenous knowledge resources, restructuring and reforming Africa's libraries, and a vast improvement in information management capabilities by Africa's top librarians. It is concluded that Africa must seek to establish her own knowledge and information base which matches her information needs and perceptions rather than pursuing strategies which increase her dependency on foreign information resources.

## Introduction

African Librarianship is now over twenty years old. It came about, largely, as a post-independence undertaking in institution building carried out jointly between the newly independent countries, and former colonial masters. Later on, the development of African Librarianship was to receive added impetus from the involvement of Scandinavian based aid agencies, Unesco, and the U.S.A.

The hope that African Librarianship offered the "best" approach in the supply of library-based information services to the different socio-economic groups and national economic sectors in Africa remains to this day. Over the past ten years, however, "watchers" of African Librarianship have raised concern towards its lack of direction and relevance in general, but particularly in the context of the national development process. Hope for concrete achievements has been replaced with frustration as each of the milestones marking the progress of African Librarianship dissolve into a shimmering mirage. Admittedly, much of this disappointment with African Librarianship has come from a younger generation of librarians and lecturers and students of librarianship both in Africa and overseas.

In this paper we evaluate the performance of African librarianship and attempt to indicate alternative methods of development which might make African librarianship more successful in the future than it has been in the past twenty years. When preparing this paper a number of questions served to act as my compass, e.g.: What impact has librarianship made on the African society? How are the problems facing African librarianship perceived by the major actors? What solutions do they suggest? What are the limitations to these perceptions and their accompanying solutions? Which are the problems these individuals fail to see because they are themselves part of these problems? Can African Librarianship be reformed using a different reference framework to the Anglo-American model of librarianship?

### **The status of library services in Africa**

There is now no shortage of data which provides consistent evidence of the extremely low use and impact of library services in Africa. Evidence from different countries in Africa, and papers written by a number of prominent librarians, researchers, and students of library and information science all attest to this fact.

In a recent dissertation by Mbambo (1989) she found that in Gaborone (Botswana), a town of about 120,000, membership of the National-Public Library is about 9000 which is 7.5%. If we were to include users of academic libraries, and those of special libraries and other types of documentation centers throughout the whole country, the overall number of users as a percentage of Botswanas' population would most likely not exceed 5%.

In another study from Kenya by Kihara (1986) the regular users of Kenya National Library Service can be estimated to be around 2–3% of the total population. Writing in 1986 Mulaha Akinyi outlined the unfavourable information provision environment facing the education sector by noting that each secondary school is allocated by the government 20–50 Kenyan pounds annually for purchasing books. According to the writer such a tiny sum is inadequate to lay the foundation of a good library system, let alone to sustain the life of an educational library service.

In Tanzania, a country of 23mi. people it was found that the number of users of library services is between 1–2% of the population, Mchombu (1984). This low percentage of use is accounted for by a library system characterised by poor library facilities in primary schools, secondary schools and most tertiary colleges. The public library service in turn has directed all its services to urban centers and avoided the rural dwellers who make up 80% of the country's population. In most government departments and parastatal organisations the so called library is often a storehouse for old newspapers, empty boxes and other unwanted items. According to one source the key problem is lack of foreign exchange. Kaungamno (1984:4) holds this problem responsible for the failure of the public library service "... to give back-up service to adult education programmes ... and to support adequately the millions of students pursuing education in various institutions in the country. ..." His conclusion in the above paper is suitably titled s.o.s. which contains an appeal, tinged with despair, beseeching donor agencies to come to the rescue.

Alemna (1989) evaluating the progress made by library services in Ghana, has concluded that "... the decade 1974–1984 has been the worst years, so far, in the history of librarianship in Ghana. ..." The picture he presents is like a gloomy shadow over all types of libraries. He gives an account of "... public libraries with outdated materials, some dating as far back as 1947. Many areas in the country are without public libraries because the Library Board has failed to implement its plans to provide libraries to all parts of Ghanas' districts. Most school libraries in the country are full of materials which are of little value to the students ... and managed by disgruntled library clerks who have no interest in librarianship. ... The materials in our University libraries are mostly outdated and of no academic and research value ... most special libraries, thirty years after independence, are still struggling to survive. ..."

The writer hopes that the introduction of IMF inspired economic recovery plans will change all this for the better.

Further evidence confirming the state of deterioration of library services in Africa has recently come from Michael Hailu (1989:2). He points out that:

"... in most of sub-Saharan Africa, the infrastructure and manpower needed to provide information services to researchers and policy makers are either non-existent or inadequate. ..."



The most telling argument by the same writer, however, is whereby he points out that:

“... facilities and services developed through bilateral and international aid usually collapse after the withdrawal of such support, since the local commitment to sustain them does not exist. . . It is not unusual to notice expensive equipment, including P.Cs, photocopiers, microfiche cameras and readers collecting dust at a . . . library for want of a spare part that cost a few dollars in foreign currency. . .”

The above quotation, in my view, introduces a significant dimension to the diagnosis of the problems currently afflicting African Librarianship, namely, foreign aid by itself may not be the ultimate solution if African willpower is missing. This phenomenon of diminished self-confidence and despair has also been noted by Graham (1987:84) who comments:

“... It is a symptom of tremendous pessimism to state a challenge as a matter, not of making things go, but simply to delay the collapse. However, in almost all institutions I visited the demand for an approach which acknowledges a crisis of basic needs is self-evident. The photocopier is broken down ..funds for buying books have dwindled to nothing. . . If one of the products of the service is an annual abstract, it has not been published for the last five years. . .”

This brief survey of the current state of African Librarianship would not be complete without some evidence from one of Africa's leading politician and a few of Africa's top Scholars.

Recently, Dr. Kenneth Kaunda, President of Zambia as reported by the Chronicle (1987:9) warned Zambians that they are heading for intellectual bankruptcy because of the poor state of the nations' bookshops. The President called the absence of good books a 'national tragedy'. However, one Zambian publisher is reported in the same issue to have pointed out that “. . . a report proposing solutions to the book plight was completed some-times ago, but has been gathering dust while the authorities give it their consideration . . . the reports suggests the formation of a national book development council along the lines recommended by Unesco. . .” Mbewe (1987). Once again the problem of perception is evident in Kaunda's lament, that the best books must come from overseas, this is an attitude shared by the majority of the elite in Africa including librarians of course.

This brief continental survey of the status of African Librarianship will now be rounded up with a few comments from some of the beneficiaries of Africas' libraries.

In the second conference of African Vice-Chancellors held in Swaziland it was revealed that because of lack of uptodate publicatons in University and research libraries, the headway being made in the science's and medicine and other disciplines in such Universities as Ibadan and Makerere in the 60's has virtually come to a dead stop in the 80's. According the late Crowder (1985).

“... Many Universities (and research centers) have lost their ability to make contributions in the theoretical and even applied sciences, and therefore to the solution of the continents problems. . .”

An identically weak information support environment at lower levels of education was the subject of a report titled 'Books and Development' by Lalage Brown (1982). Although dated the report reads as if it was written yesterday. It is reported that textbooks in Ugandan schools have been handed down from one class to the next for the past ten years. Many school libraries have not acquired a new book for more than 10 years. The price of a primary school text book was equal to over a week's salary for a teacher. The same trends have been reported in other African countries, Sierra-Leone being one of them.

## **A re-mapping of the problems of African Librarianship**

If one is to analyse these statements concerning the problems facing African Librarianship, particularly those made by librarians they all seem to agree, with a few exceptions, that the current problems are derived from the 'hostile social environment' within which libraries exist in Africa. To cite the *most often mentioned problems*: Kaungamno (1984), Lundu (1986), Kihara (1986), Alemna (1989).

1. African readers have not yet developed a reading habit.
2. Africa's oral culture and authoritarian transmission of knowledge does not favour the development of libraries.
3. Governments and decision makers do not fully support libraries, in particular they have failed to institute and legislate national information policies.
4. African governments lack the notion of information as an important factor and strategy in the process of national development.
5. Over sensitivity of governments in Africa to critical information hence frequent attempts to block access to certain categories of information.
6. A low level of informatization of the African society, and overall low competence and propensity in incorporating large amounts of innovative information into goods and services being produced.
7. Illiteracy rates are too high to enable people, especially in rural areas and urban shantytownships to appreciate use of libraries.
8. Students read only to pass examinations after which they stop reading.
9. The book industry has failed to supply sufficient materials in indigenous languages.
10. The economic recession in African countries has made it very difficult for libraries to obtain adequate funding and often there has been an absolute freeze on foreign exchange allocations.

There is no doubt that these 'external problems' exist. This checklist, however, has two major flaws—first, do these 'problems' represent what has caused African Librarianship to be weak or do they simply reflect its failure to adapt adequately to African social economic and cultural conditions?

We must face the fact that unless the real problems facing African Librarianship are mapped out accurately there is a real danger that what ever prescription is suggested, it will only cure the symptoms rather than the disease. We can only come to appropriate solutions if we carry out a critical re examination of the current conventional concepts and assumptions and if we are creative enough not to limit our search for solutions to the inherited model of traditional librarianship leading to the same old litany of unworkable recommendations. To us the above list of problems largely betrays the failure of African Librarianship to adapt to Africa's social economic and cultural realities and this is the *first theme of our concern*.

The first question to be asked is what are the burdens African Librarianship has inherited from the past? There is no better guide for this purpose than a recent publication by Sturges and Neill (1990). The point is made by the authors that after independence, African Librarianship was born through the efforts of several expatriate librarians nurtured in the Anglo-American brand of librarianship without much consultation of African users. At that early stage, libraries were very highly regarded and obtained similar commitments as other essential services such as hospitals and schools, partly because of the thirst for education which gripped Africa at independence and the hope that libraries would contribute significantly towards achieving this cherished goal.

Despite of its early success, African Librarianship was unable to live up to the expectation of its government backers, or the intended users. At this formative stage, there was a belief



that the information needs, and the information seeking behaviour of Africans was identical to those of library users in Europe and North America. It was also thought that the concept of a philosophy of librarianship as practiced in the Anglo-American tradition with its organisational and bureaucratic structures, bibliographically-biased foundation, and middle-class outlook could all be imported without modifications to Africa. It was left to the African public to adapt themselves as best as they could to this alien institution, for the institution was sacrosanct.

Although time has passed, African Librarianship has found it very difficult to stoop down and draw nourishment from its own people, and in turn enrich its own environment. Instead it has held itself aloof and isolated and has been content to serve the minority rather than develop innovative services and form alliances which would have permitted services for both the minority elite and the majority with low levels of education.

The second problem has been caused by the structural decoupling of libraries in Africa from their key user target groups, and the development of an inward looking mentality which tends to glorify internal processes at the expense of maximising use of library resources. Many examples abound to illustrate this contradiction—University librarians who claim to be academicians but are petrified at the thought of lecturing on information use skills to the University community and have no idea of academic and research activities going on at the University. National/Public libraries which purport to offer information in support of national development but have no idea what the country's national current development plan is targeted to accomplish, and have no links with the business, commercial or agricultural communities and their shelves are groaning under the weight of second-rate novels donated from Europe and North America. Few in these libraries have any inkling of the need to analyse the country's development plan and strategies for the purpose of drawing up a national information need profile.

It is argued here that libraries should be re-structured to reflect the development process at institution and national level. Such restructuring should be based on the belief that the major task of librarians is to supply information to users rather than processing and guarding documents. A frequent complaint of staff in libraries/information centers in Africa is that their work is not held in high esteem by society. It seems to me evident that to find their own niche in society, library and information workers have to enhance their role of information gatekeepers and act as an indispensable link between society and information.

It is equally important, however, to assume the role of flexible facilitators of information transfer and exchange within institutions, groups and society at large. Each library should establish administrative links with its users to involve them in both needs specification and policy making. It is a fallacy that librarians are a separate and inviolable sect, and libraries must always be dressed in a distinctive straightjacket labelled 'library'. The reality is clearly that librarianship—viewed as information provision—is not a separate sector but an integral and organic part, which is necessary for the survival and development of a parent institution, or on-going process, or nation-wide campaigns. In such a situation success for a library will depend on how closely it can facilitate the integration of optimum information into the fabric of programs of the parent organisation.

Elsewhere in this paper we have quoted several prominent sources with an acute awareness of the current shortage of publications facing Africa and their preferred solution that foreign assistance be stepped up to enable the importation of the required materials. In my view this is a shortsighted solution at best, and at the worst it is a dangerous one. I term this solution shortsighted for two reasons, one it ignores the serious consequences of intellectual and mental subjugation which results from the domination of local information centers by

foreign publications. Secondly it detracts attention from the need to plan and develop an indigenous publishing capability.

A number of writers have warned of the danger developing societies face in uncritically accepting foreign knowledge and information some of which distorts their own reality particularly in the context of information as a source of power and influence. The sociologist Young (1961) argues that '... those in positions of power will attempt to define what is taken as knowledge ... they will define their own knowledge as superior ... and measure educational attainments in terms of it ... there is a close relationship between knowledge and power ...' In support of these views Durrani (1985) points out that "... Historically, every ruling class has established an information system which serves its own class interests..." Likewise Sardar (1988:148) expresses a similar view thus:

"... there is a direct relationship between the organization of information and knowledge, the human mind, and social behaviour. Information and knowledge organized on the basis of a particular world-view, will direct the mind towards that world-view and hence will influence the behaviour of those who have (information and knowledge) imposed on them..."

In Africa today there is too much evidence of a distorted perception of problems and issues, alien cultural forms and characteristics for one not to agree with the above writers.

If we are to accept that the main duty of African Librarianship is to satisfy the basic information needs of society in such areas as: health and prevention of disease, environmental protection, farming and livestock husbandry, family planning, appropriate technology, education and literacy, maternal and child care, industrial production, commerce and economic planning, it seems mandatory that African countries should strive to create their own knowledge and information base relevant to these requirements. This argument should not be construed to mean that we are advocating for Africa to isolate itself from scientific and technological developments, throughout the world, far from it, Africa can and should learn from others but such knowledge and information acquisition should be carried out selectively and objectively to breach an identified information gap. Olden (1987). In turn, Africa should share her own knowledge with the international community.

The present information acquisition pattern in Africa is that importation of publications and other information resources closely follows former colonial ties, with former British colonies importing most of their publications from Britain and the U.S.A., while the former French colonies import most of their publications from France. It is argued here that though such preferences are partly dictated by language knowhow, it is still a non-objective information acquisition criteria through which Africa has failed to benefit fully from scientific and technological knowledge originating from sources without recent colonial links. West Germany, the Nordic countries and Japan are good examples of this commission. Japan in particular in the areas of industrial and general economic management because the concept of Japanese management is more relevant to Africa than the management theories of Europe which are based on excessive individualism.

Neither has Africa benefited much from the information resources of other developing countries especially by accessing relevant information from the Newly Industrialised Countries of the Asian Sub-continent. It seems, however, that the most worrying shortcoming of African Librarianship is the failure to promote the exchange of information among African countries through regional and continental networks. Since African countries have a similar cultural background and face similar national development challenges, the knowledge and information products of one country are likely to closely match the information needs in other



African countries. In our view this constitutes a strong basis for creating the required structures and supporting existing institutions which facilitate the transfer of information among African countries e.g. the Pan-African Documentation System under the Economic Commission for Africa, SACCAR which has been formed to supply agricultural research information to SADCC member countries in southern Africa, Kyomo (1989), and other institutions elsewhere in Africa which have been created to facilitate the sharing of information produced in Africa but are failing to do their duty because of indifferent support from the African information sector.

It has been stated elsewhere in this paper that African countries have to concentrate on generating their own knowledge and information base which matches their information needs rather than perpetuate the current state of information-dependency on Europe and the U.S.A. Such an undertaking will have to be designed in such a way that it can incorporate the oral indigenous knowledge resources into the refurbished national information base. The challenge to African Librarianship calls for creating information structures and methodologies which can synthesize Africa's vast traditional knowledge resources with the modern knowledge resources.

The second theme of our concern is that if problems of African Librarianship are solely explained in terms of 'external forces' then it is too easy to ignore what we consider to be most serious weaknesses of African libraries--namely poor international management, and lack of a marketing strategy in information provision.

A major contributor to the decline and marginalisation of African Librarianship is the weak management and leadership capabilities of most of Africa's top librarians. For library services to be run efficiently, resources (staff, documents, buildings and equipment, vehicles etc) must be managed competently to ensure the lowest cost of expenditure per unit of service rendered, Mchombu (1982). Data generated by the library management process must be collected continuously and related to the different items of expenditure to identify levels of expenditure which cannot be justified when weighted against the importance of a particular service. In this way a library can work out performance indicators and relate these to costs incurred e.g. the cost of the various components of a library service: -- salaries, informational resources, transport, equipment, services to specific user groups etc.

At the moment it is difficult for many libraries in Africa to monitor their performance in relation to resource utilization because the basic data is either not kept or if kept it is not properly analysed. This is ironical because quite often African librarians have castigated planners and decision-makers for their failure to utilize information in their work. It now appears that librarians are equally guilty of the same sin. A management information system is obviously one of the missing links in library management in Africa. As Kinder (1989) shows from a slightly different context, armed with such data it becomes possible to detect wastage, distorted expenditures, and underfunded key services and provides a solid basis for planning future development without such data plans are mere lists of dreams.

Three qualities, it seems to me, are urgently demanded from Africa's top librarians. First is a capacity for collective leadership, the ability to work with and utilize fully the diverse talents of all members of staff. Second (and this above all) is the need for a person who is fully committed to the virtues of marketing library and information services to society. Third is the need for a person who is sharply aware of the combination of opportunities and problems posed by the information environment, and has enough confidence to pilot an information system based on the principle that locally produced information resources are more relevant than imported ones.

The most decisive component of an information provision system, apart from the users and their needs, is human resources. Having briefly touched on the shortcomings of Africa's top



librarians, we shall now briefly outline the type of personnel required to implement the reforms and new look African Librarianship advocated in this paper. The type of staff required must be of very high quality who have received appropriate education and are highly motivated to respond to the different information handling situations in an innovative and efficient manner. Every country in Africa is full of young people who meet the above criteria unfortunately both the training and personnel management style suffer from major deficiencies. We still encounter, too often, extreme forms of authoritarian rule in today's African Librarianship. Decisions are often made not on the basis of laid down procedures but on the basis of the whims of the one in-charge and can change from one day to the next. Various forms of injustices are still perpetrated with impunity, and in some countries the evils of nepotism, corruption and political persecution combine into an evil concoction which serves to demoralise staff and create high turnover of good people.

The original source of the problem of finding staff with the required skills and attitude is the weaknesses of Library School programs and inadequate on-the-job training programs by libraries and Africa's weak Library Associations. Relevant training whether offered in a Library School or as part of continuing education should be doing at least two things: First suffusing the entire programme with a consciousness of the African information environment as the foundation on which present libraries are created. Second develop an in-depth programme of specialization to include: – repackaging of information, indigenous knowledge resources, and development librarianship.

Appropriate education is already starting to emerge in a few African schools but in most cases library and information science education is still problematic with some schools contented to copy syllabi in use in European/North American schools 15 years ago. On the other hand sending students abroad has proved to be equally irrelevant because they are often compelled to take courses which were designed for a totally different information environment, Kurshid (1970), Sardar (1988).

At the moment we are witnessing the opening up of new schools in a number of African countries most of them with only one or two full time members of staff, a serious shortage of learning resources, and the inevitable outdated syllabi which has been hastily copied from overseas with little or no participation of the Library Association and potential employers in the country. Informaton Trends (1989), Otikey (1989). Two recent examples from Moi University in Kenya, Rosenberg (1989), and University of Botswana, Harvard-Williams (1988) where the formulation of a curriculum is preceded by a survey of education and training needs of library/information workers are among the few exceptions to this sad trend. It is obvious that education and training of future librarians for Africa whether carried out within Africa (and totally dependent on imported textbooks) or overseas, with a few exceptions, is failing to produce the type of personnel who can spearhead the required reformation of African Librarianship.

Appropriate training of fresh graduates, and retraining of existing staff (including the retraining of lecturers in Schools of Library and Information Sciences) must include basic skills in information technology. Information technology which currently plays a peripheral role in most libraries in Africa could both enhance efficiency and alter the poor image the public has about librarians. The time has come for microcomputing skills, database management skills, awareness of satellite communication potentials to be regarded as common knowledge areas rather than esoteric skills.

The next problem which we shall consider in this paper is composite in nature but can be summarized through use of the following phrases: lack of a sense of direction, an attitude of despondency and over-dependency on foreign donor agencies. Evidence of this problem is seen often when programs are conceived because they are likely to appeal to donor agencies

and not necessarily because they are a priority. What happens when the donor funding comes to an end has already been highlighted elsewhere in this paper (see Hailu 1989, and Graham 1987). We advance the view that part of the explanation for this malaise is the absence of policy guidelines to provide a sense of direction, and clarification of the role of African Librarianship in the complex information exchange/transfer process, both within a country and at the international information exchange sphere, for each country to derive full benefit from its own information resources and those of other countries.

A first step towards tackling this insidious stance would be through the establishment of national information policies to provide much needed guidelines for the management of information and informatics at the national level. The national information policies should also identify the mechanism and technologies required by government officials, decision-makers, the sectors of industry, commerce, agriculture, health, and education to obtain the relevant information.

It is worth injecting a note of caution here concerning the relationship of national information policies to library development policies. Currently several African countries are in the process of formulating what they perceive is a national information policy using the various guidelines issued out by Unesco, Lundu (1987), Wesley-Tanaskovic (1985). Their efforts, however, are likely to end in failure because of two basic limitations; first there is a failure to comprehend that a policy for libraries, archives, and documentation centers cannot be successfully masqueraded as a national information policy. Also the fact that the task of formulating public policies is a prerogative of governments and the legislature, hence African librarians are likely to be disappointed if they continue to misjudge the role and contribution they can make towards the formulation of national information policies in their country. At present there is an illusion that librarians are the formulators of national information policies, Mchombu and Miti (1990).

It is gratifying to note that the search for solutions beyond current models of library services and the formulation of valid parameters for action has attracted the attention of at least two international organisations—the International Development Research Center (IDRC) of Canada, and the German Foundation for International Development (DSE). The Information and Documentation section of DSE has developed a training policy which favours south to south cooperation and currently runs a number of continuing education programs in Eastern and Southern Africa following a training needs plan identified and formulated by the region itself. The Information Sciences Division of IDRC, has recently articulated an information strategy for Africa largely based on the advice of African information specialists who assisted in identifying Africa's information needs and priorities from which a plan of action has already been mapped out. (IDRC, 1989).

### Concluding remarks

This paper makes an attempt to outline the problems and challenges African Librarianship faces as we move into a new decade. These challenges are categorized into two broad areas, first are the problems which characterize the information environment of Africa and second are the problems which are internal to African Librarianship. It is argued that in the past most of the efforts to analyse the problems of African Librarianship have tended to concentrate on external problems rather than the root causes which are the internal weaknesses of African Librarianship. The conclusion of this paper is that the solution to the current problems of African Librarianship is *primarily internal in nature rather than increased external assistance*. Foreign aid can offer temporary relief but it cannot compensate for the weak foundation on which African Librarianship was built.

The second major conceptual conclusion of this paper is that it is unlikely to find appropri-

ate solutions to the real problems facing African Librarianship if we confine our search within the inherited framework of an imported and unreformed model librarianship. As one writer put it recently this will simply lead to futile never ending demands for foreign funds to import more information resources of marginal relevance, and to construct library facilities incapable of satisfying more than 10% of Africa's information needs, Durrani (1985).

We wish to re-capture the main suggestions offered in the main text of this paper as follows:

1. There is an urgent need for feasibility studies to be carried out on the main libraries in Africa as a precondition for setting new goals and objectives and establishing socially accountable and relevant institutions which can satisfy the basic information needs of all the people of a given country.
2. As we enter the 1990s' African Librarianship is crying for reforms, specifically in its organisational structures and positioning, staff management and career structures, and a reassessment of the theoretical constructs which served as its foundation.
3. The management of African libraries require to be strengthened, in particular the replacement of one-man (woman) regimes with management teams of senior staff. The introduction of management information systems is mandatory if the planned development of libraries in Africa is to be converted from the dream of tomorrow to a concrete program of action to control future events. There is a training need in top level management for Africa's top librarians as part of a continuing education program.
4. African Librarianship should forge alliances with the following natural allies in the information sector: – the publishing industry, the education and non-formal education sector, the informatics sector, the mass media, and the extension agencies in order to create a strong pressure group to pressurize relevant authority in the country to implement the formulation of national information policies.
5. Africa's information needs cannot be fully satisfied through the importation of information products from overseas. Such importation if unregulated have the serious side-effects of mental and intellectual subjugation, and distorts the perception of users.

It is of great importance therefore for libraries to develop a capacity for small scale production of information resources which will breach the information gap which foreign publications can never be expected to fill through use of Desk Top Publishing technology. Libraries should also develop close working relationships with local publishers to increase the number and utilization of locally produced publications.

Most of the suggestions offered here are already emerging in a few library systems in Africa. Given the wide diversity within sub-Saharan Africa, each country's information professionals have to develop a strategy for the rehabilitation of librarianship suits best their socio-economic circumstances. The aim of my paper has been to seek a common ground for intensifying an ongoing debate on the relevance, constraints and future of African Librarianship.

May I end this presentation by referring directly to the question which forms the title of this paper. It is my contention that the *way forward* for African Librarianship will be closely linked to the fortunes of Africa. Sub-Saharan Africa is in a troubled state both economically and politically but is searching for alternative solutions which do not include 'conditionalities' of new forms of subjugation. Other professional groups are actively involved in reassessing their role in order to determine what meaningful contributions they can make to the reconstruction of Africa. The road ahead for African Librarianship, therefore has already been sign posted. It involves reforming African Librarianship into 'development librarianship' which is capable of making a major contribution towards the development of Africa, but perhaps of equal significance is for African Librarianship to develop its own identity rather



than being a mimic of Anglo-American Librarianship. The substance and methods of African Librarianship will be an interlocking mix of indigenous knowledge and modern knowledge resources responding not only to Africa's information needs, but also arising out of the reality of Africa.

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# The Expansion of the University of the Air of Japan and the Changing Function of Regional University Libraries

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## Abstract

At present, broadcasting coverage of the University of the Air of Japan is limited to the Kanto region, which is one of the eight regions of Japan. Tokyo is the central city of this region. In the future, when the broadcasting coverage of the University of the Air has expanded into the other seven regions of Japan, the cooperation of regional university libraries, both national and private, will be indispensable, especially in the Regular Students' use of direct-access materials such as books, magazines, and newspapers.

University libraries will collect, for the sake of their students, all the video-cassettes of the taped lectures of the University of the Air. The University of the Air in turn will obtain the aid of university libraries. The mutual assistance and cooperation between university libraries, especially regional university libraries, and the University of the Air will be more effective with the help of a network system which ties all types of libraries and information centers together through computer and television terminals.

## 1. The University of the Air of Japan and its expansion

The University of the Air of Japan is new and different from traditional Japanese institutions of higher learning in the sense that it is an open university. It aims to meet national expectations as a nucleus institution of higher learning for lifelong education in Japan. The University admits any applicant who is over the age of eighteen and does not have any entrance requirement except that in order to become a Regular Student it is necessary to be a high school graduate. The University broadcasts lectures through its own radio and television stations. These lectures are based on published materials prepared by its faculty members.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the University provides a full program of education through the use of guidance by mail and classroom instruction at study centers.

The University of the Air has established a Faculty of Liberal Arts which offers courses in three areas of study, each of which has two majors. This academic system is illustrated in Figure 1 below.<sup>2</sup>

In the University of the Air of Japan, there are four different student classifications: (1) Regular Students intending to graduate, (2) Non-Degree Students who enroll for one year or for one term, (3) Seminar Students intending to study a specific subject for one year, and (4) Special Students who want to become Regular Students by studying specific subjects for one year. No entrance examination is required for admission in any category. In most cases, students are accepted on first-come-first served basis.

People with intention of graduating from the University of the Air register as Regular Students. The University of the Air enrolled its first students in April, 1985, and turned out its first 544 graduates with the degree of Bachelor of Arts in March, 1989. Their ages ranged



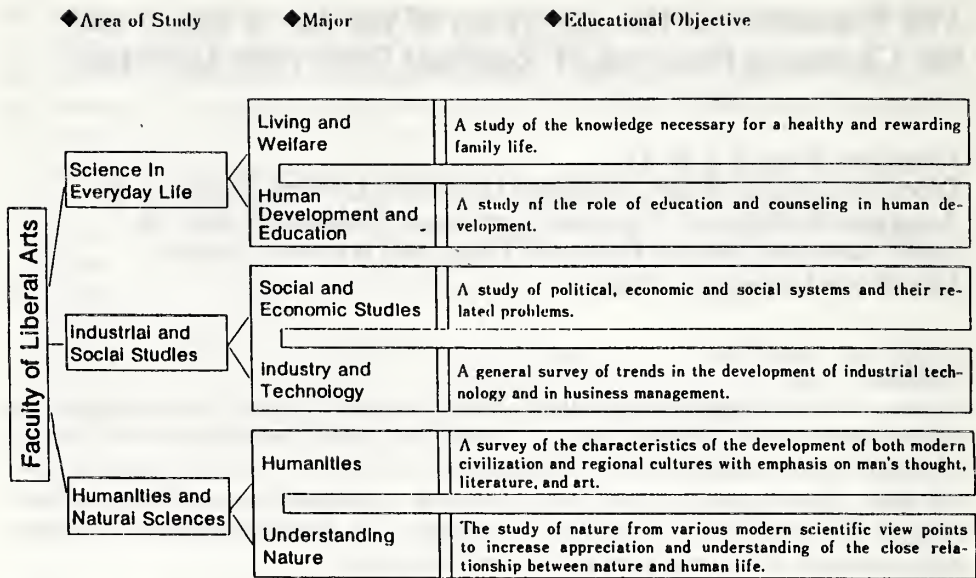


Figure 1. Academic Structure of the University of the Air

from twenty-two to seventy-nine. In March of 1990, the number graduated from the University reached 602. A total of 26,000 students of all ages, both sexes, and many occupations are currently enrolled in the University. They are pursuing various academic programs in their homes, at their places of work, and at the study centers.

At present, broadcasting coverage is limited to the Kanto region,<sup>3</sup> which includes Tokyo. Six study centers and two branch study centers have been established in the Kanto region for giving lectures and academic counselling. University of the Air officials are making preparations to expand their broadcasting network so that they may be able to serve the whole country in the future. This April, four new video study centers were established at Hiroshima University in Hiroshima, Kyushu University in Fukuoka, Hokkaido University in Sapporo, and Ryukyu University in Okinawa. Though broadcasts are not yet received in these four regions, these four video study centers will accept Non-Degree Students who enroll for one year or for one term beginning in October of this year.

## 2. The changing function of regional university libraries

Graduation from the University of the Air is possible after being enrolled at least four years and having received a total of at least 124 credits in stipulated areas. Those graduating from the University receive the degree of Bachelor of Arts. During the year before graduation, Regular Students must complete either a graduation thesis or the equivalent. For this purpose research is conducted under the supervision of one of the professors of the University of the Air.

Each study center possesses a collection of, on the average, about 26,000 books, 63 journals, and two collections of six thousand taped lectures available for viewing. For a Regular Student to complete a graduation thesis, however, the collection of books and journals at each study center is not satisfactory either in quality or in quantity. The library on the campus of the University of the Air now possesses a collection of approximately 80,000 books and

537 journals, and is to be expanded up to a collection of 300,000 books within several years.

In the future, however, when the broadcasting coverage of the University of the Air has expanded into the other seven regions of Japan, the cooperation of regional universities' libraries, both national and private, will be indispensable, especially in the Regular Students' use of direct-access materials such as books, magazines, and newspapers. For example, principal university libraries of each region such as those of Hiroshima University,<sup>4</sup> Kyushu University, Hokkaido University, and Ryukyu University, will have to play an important role.

In addition to cooperation which will benefit students of the University of the Air, university libraries have been experimenting in the use of non-print media. In the past, collecting and keeping manuscripts, books, and journals, as the means of recording and transmitting information, has constituted the main role of university libraries. Now, new technologies for information transfer are providing new kinds of materials and are affecting the role of university libraries in Japan. Photocopies and microfilms, computers and databases, optical memory discs, facsimile transmission and data communication have all come into common use. There is a growing awareness that university libraries must expand into multimedia centers.

University libraries will collect, for the sake of their students, all the video-cassettes of the taped lectures of the University of the Air. The University of the Air in turn will obtain the aid of university libraries. The mutual assistance and cooperation between university libraries, especially regional university libraries, and University of the Air will be more effective with the help of a network system which ties all types of libraries and information centers together through computer and television terminals.

#### Notes

1. The broadcast materials are produced both through the assistance and cooperation of the National Institute of Multi Media Education and with the cooperation of specialists in various fields at both national and private universities.
2. The University of the Air Foundation, *A Guide to the University of the Air, 1989*, (Chiba City, Japan: University of the Air Foundation, 1989), p. 13.
3. Japan can be divided into eight regions. They are, from north to south, Hokkaido (Sapporo), Tohoku (Sendai), Kanto (Tokyo), Chubu (Nagoya), Kansai (Osaka and Kyoto), Chugoku-Shikoku (Hiroshima), Kyushu (Fukuoka), and Okinawa (Naha) regions. The central city or cities of each region is indicated within the parentheses following the name of the region.
4. The collection of books of the Hiroshima University Library numbers 2,400,000.

# Mobilization of Library Resources for Literacy, Knowledge and Development in the English-speaking Caribbean

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## Abstract

The paper gives a general overview of the problems associated with literacy and development in the English-speaking Caribbean. Three case studies from the territories of Trinidad, Jamaica and the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States are used to exemplify what is being done in the region to provide information for socio-economic development and as an aid in the fight against illiteracy. The author concludes that library services will benefit from increasing support if there is widespread awareness of their potential contribution to development.

## Introduction

The English-speaking or Commonwealth Caribbean is defined as all those countries in and around the Caribbean sea which were formerly colonies of the United Kingdom. They vary in size and population from the largest in area, Guyana, 83,000 square miles, with a population estimated at 793,000, to Anguilla, about 35 square miles and a population of 7,000, through Jamaica, the most populous, 4,243 square miles with a population of 2½ million, Trinidad and Tobago with a population of 1,055,800 in 1,980 square miles, and Barbados, an area of 166 square miles inhabited by some 252,000 people. Beside the mainland territories of Belize (on the east coast of Central America) and Guyana (on the north-east coast of South America) the territories form an archipelago stretching from Jamaica (south of the eastern extremity of Cuba) to Trinidad and Tobago, 7 miles distant from Venezuela on the north coast of South America.

While English is the official language of the countries, it is not the mother tongue of all the region. Much of the society's interaction may be conducted in varieties of Caribbean English Creole, Caribbean French Creole or more than one Indic language and dialect or speech patterns intelligible in large measure to the individual territory. The schooling system had been programmed to condemn and suppress these forms of communication, but post independence revaluations have been more liberal and have regarded them as legitimate forms of expression.

A high incidence of illiteracy, not to be confused with no schooling, has for a considerable length of time been a salient feature of the territories and was projected in 1980 to range from 8% in Barbados to 60% in St. Lucia, with an average for all territories of 19.2%. The high rate for St. Lucia may be skewed by, and associated with the large proportion of persons who are monolingual speakers of St. Lucian creole thus finding difficulty in participating in an education system in which English is the medium of instruction. Chronic shortages of qualified teachers and materials, deteriorating buildings and equipment have become the perennial problems of primary and secondary education. The universal measure of "functional literacy" as the equivalent content of four years of primary schooling as sufficient to establish literacy as a lifelong skill is not valid in the context of the English-speaking Caribbean. It must



be noted however that the majority of persons who have become literate have done so as a result of their primary schooling during childhood.

As may be imagined, the territories that comprise the English-speaking Caribbean are not all at the same level of development in so far as library and information services are concerned. It may be said that on average the larger territories are in the forefront of such services, but they all suffer from what may be termed "Third World development patterns" – the existence of traditionally oral folk culture, escalating population growth, a low per capita income, a limited number of skilled personnel and a shortage of books. Most Third World peoples have limited access to the world body knowledge, for the countries in which they live are at the periphery of the international intellectual system. Information however, is the most important factor in the economic development process, a process broadly defined to include the actualization of personal and communal potentialities in the society. Economic development translates into greater production and productivity and the provision of avenues which allow the less fortunate to realise some of their potential. Information, the raw material for knowledge is therefore perhaps the most important factor in socio-economic development.

The result of a survey of information use and users done for one territory in the area has indicated that economic, marketing and demographic data represent the main areas of vital information needs of most information or knowledge workers in both private sector and public sector enterprises. This increased need for up to date marketing, consumer, financial, wage and economic data has created a fast growing market and survey research industry which is the most heavily used information source in the private sector.

Several sectoral information systems designed to support the work of regional policymakers, planners, technocrats, researchers and entrepreneurs in enunciated priority areas – agriculture, energy, industry, trade, finance have been developed by libraries in the area. Most of these are decentralized, cooperative, sectoral information networks while a few are based on the resources of specific institutions. They offer a variety of services in formats appropriate to their users.

This paper presents three case studies of efforts made by some of the English-speaking territories to mobilize their resources to assist in the provision of information for knowledge, literacy and development. The choice of examples has been demarcated by a desire to cover as many territories as possible within the mandate circumscribed by the three subject areas and covering service to a broad cross section of Government planners, industry and the general public. Examples have therefore been taken from library and information services in Trinidad, Jamaica and the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States, a grouping of eight smaller territories – Antigua and Barbuda, The British Virgin Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Montserrat, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia and St. Vincent and the Grenadines – which have joined together to provide a more economically viable unity.

### **Information for industrial growth (Trinidad)**

An interesting and dynamic mobilization of resources in the provision of information for industrial growth of the region is actuated by the Caribbean Industrial Research Institute (CARIRI) through its Technical Information and Liaison Service Division. Most of the services and projects of the Institute have evolved as a result of actively identifying user needs, and by responding to these information needs by means of aggressive marketing techniques. A proactive approach is used in the collection of relevant technical information, its storage, retrieval and dissemination, more particularly to small and medium sized industry in Trinidad and Tobago in particular and in general to the wider Caribbean. Some 69% of information requests originate from small- to medium-sized industry and potential entrepreneurs.

Information services at CARIRI have been channelled into the individualised, customized sort, tailored to meet the specific needs of the clientele, whether these be the small entrepreneurs or the decision makers in government. The service focusses on access to content within publications and the provision of answers to specific questions rather than the provision of subject bibliographies or references to possible sources.

Some 1,000 requests on average are handled each year, since the initiation of the service in 1970, with a peak in 1987 of 1,288 requests. In that year, 43% of the users of the services needed information on manufacturing processes and technical knowhow, 16.2%, information on tests, standards and specifications, 13% needed information on equipment, machinery, product and ingredient suppliers as well as suppliers of services, while only 6.1% of requests dealt with the supply of publications.

Recognizing the strength of information technology, they have moved into this area by offering a service permitting rapid access to information and filling needs in the shortest possible time.

Access to overseas commercial data bases is maintained (a) to review the state of the art in particular areas of technology, (b) to obtain current listings of plant and machinery suppliers, (c) to search for patents and trademarks, and (d) to obtain information on potential companies with whom the local or regional businessman may wish to do business.

CARIRI has exercised various methodologies to disseminate technology information to users and potential users. Of these the technical seminar or workshop has proven to be extremely effective. One workshop "Information for Industrial Growth" held in late March 1990 was part of the Canada-based International Development Research Centre (IDRC) project "Industrial Information and Communication". The workshop included case study sessions conducted by selected industry leaders as well as a talk on "Market Access: the information connection" given by the institution's information specialist. These workshops not only disseminate information but also allow participants to get hands-on experience, and have the added advantage of putting groups with similar interests in touch with each other. As a result, local trade associations, for example, for ceramics and foundry work have been formed.

The main objectives of the IDRC project are:

- (1) to strengthen and improve CARIRI's capabilities in promoting the use and application of technical and industrial information as an input to the solution of technical and managerial problems in industry, and
- (2) to establish the infrastructure for an industrial information extension service with capacity for ongoing identification of the changing technical needs of industry, thus allowing the institution to respond effectively to these needs.

Another project executed with assistance from the Organization of American States (OAS) included the preparation of a video tape, *Computers and Kings*: "Organizing a Technical Information Service for the delivery of information to users in industry". This video tape is used to sensitize management of small industries to the importance of technical information to their firm's profitability and progress, and can also be used to train and sensitize staff in information centers serving industry to the need for information outreach in serving users, thus further mobilizing library resources for development. The video tape has been distributed throughout the English-speaking Caribbean.

#### **Resource sharing for development – organization of Eastern Caribbean States**

The Organization of Eastern Caribbean States Information Network (OECS INFONET) began operations in July 1987 to create a sub-regional database coordinated in the OECS Secretariat in St. Lucia for its member states. It is both an information system, utilizing the



CDS/ISIS software package, and an information service with an underlying objective to provide information support to socio-economic development activities. The subject areas covered are those considered to be a priority in the context of development aspirations – agriculture, trade, industry, tourism, education, energy, housing, health, law and international affairs.

The network is intended to provide a broad based system of information for the variety of units and activities which the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States carries on, and which it carries on also in relation to various departments of the national participating governments.

While a certain emphasis is put on the relationship with policy makers, planners and technical and administrative personnel in Government Ministries of Planning and Information, the services of the network are also made available to students, researchers and members of the business community. Indeed, use of the network by students seems to have outstripped that by government employees.

As part of the service provided by INFONET, copies of documents held in the database are made available on request subject to size and distribution. Availability of documents may be general, limited, restricted or confidential, and documents are made available to the system on condition that distribution restrictions are observed. Requests are directed to the coordinating centre which has the documents, and photocopies are provided free of cost to OECS Government personnel, while all other persons are required to pay a per page fee to cover photocopying costs and postage.

To ensure that users are aware of, and have access to, information from the data base, the *INFONET Current Awareness Bulletin*, a selection of the latest additions, is issued monthly. Items are listed in the sequence in which they are entered, and entries contain full bibliographic information as well as an abstract, subject fields and location of the item. A Subject Index is also provided in the *Bulletin*. Figure I provides the format of a sample entry. Specialized bibliographies are also compiled and issued periodically to appropriate users.

Figure I  
Entry from *INFONET Current Awareness Bulletin*

Item No.: 3449

OECS Economic Affairs Secretariat.

OECS Strategy for reconstruction and rehabilitation hurricane Hugo, 9+2p.

OECS Central Secretariat. Castries, Saint Lucia. November 1989. Meeting of the Authority, 16.

Sponsors: OECS

Castries, Saint Lucia. 20–24 November 1989.

Draft Emergency Powers (Disasters) Act is attached.

Abstract: The rehabilitation strategy, coordinated by the OECS should aim at revitalization of productive sectors, upgrading infrastructure, replacing low-cost housing, improving health services and establishing a regional capability for disaster preparedness in the OECS and CARICOM.

Subjects covered: OECS; Natural disasters; Storms; Emergency relief.

Availability: Restricted.

Location: OECS.

Documents are usually supplied to requesters via air mail, but the services of persons travelling on Government business are also utilized as a means of courier service. This method of service has become a common form of delivery in an area where postal services can be tardy and therefore not reliable. While commercial courier service and telefax is available, these are infrequently used due to high telecommunication costs. Users are encouraged to make



requests as far in advance as possible so that the most economical means of document delivery may be used in an effort to supply information speedily.

### **Advancement of literacy (Jamaica)**

In 1972, the Government of Jamaica decided to make literacy a national priority and to launch a vigorous and massive attack on illiteracy. It is not without significance that this advance against illiteracy was at a time when the sociopolitical consciousness of the country was undergoing rapid evolution. At that time it was estimated that a 40% illiteracy level, representing 400,000 persons obtained. This, to some, alarming rate of illiteracy could have been higher had it not been for the extremely valuable contribution of the Jamaica Library Service, an islandwide public Library service of thirteen Parish Libraries in over 700 service points of full and part-time branches, book centres, bookmobiles, stores and special service points in hospitals and correctional institutions.

The Jamaica Movement for the Advancement of Literacy (JAMAL) Foundation was established in 1974 to operate the programme in an effort to eradicate illiteracy, by improving the literacy skills of the adult population and going beyond this by enabling them to participate meaningfully in the economic, social and cultural enrichment of that society. Today with the assistance of the Jamaica Library Service the level of illiteracy has been decreased to less than 300,000 or 18% in 1987.

The task of the public library service has been to provide suitable reading material of all kinds for the literate population. A persistent problem has been the lack of low level reading material with the appropriate interest level for adults. The problem becomes not only the unavailability of suitable titles on the commercial market but also the added high cost of importing books and the extremely limited budgets of most library services in the developing world. JAMAL has developed, produces and publishes its own local literacy materials which can motivate adults to learn to read by linking this material to personal goals relevant to the interests and needs of housewives, industrial workers, labourers. This material forms a part of the collections of the public library service, as the system has taken a more dominant role in providing follow-up material and attractive programmes to assist in preventing large groups of new readers from lapsing into illiteracy through insufficient practice of the newly acquired skills.

Surveys have indicated that the highest percentage of illiterates are found in the lowest occupational categories, for example, independent farmers and unskilled workers. It has also been found that the rate of illiteracy increases as one moves from the more urban parishes of the island to less urban ones, this variation being perhaps related to differences in the provision of educational facilities. The public library system, by the development of a network of public libraries in over 212 service points (with over 500 Bookmobile stops) has mobilized resources to overcome the drawbacks of environment related characteristics such as locale. In so doing the Jamaica Library Service has had to reach out into communities to seek a clientele of readers and encourage the reading habit among adults with a long and very strong oral tradition while at the same time assisting the young to attain fluency and proficiency in reading and to develop an interest in reading for pleasure.

The successful achievement of JAMAL brings to the doorstep of the public libraries new adult readers who have been brought to a level of functional literacy by the JAMAL programme. At the start of the programme it was immediately recognized that public library services had a valued role to play in developing the functional literacy of the graduate of the programme. Thus the libraries have been taking a more dominant role in providing follow-up material and attractive programmes to help to prevent these large groups of new readers from lapsing into illiteracy through lack of practice of their newly acquired skills.

Booklists for new literates are produced and distributed and book exhibitions prepared by the Library are displayed at JAMAL functions. Contact and awareness are kept alive as all parish librarians are members of the JAMAL Parish Committees, and take an active part in mounting displays (including library material) on JAMAL activities. In addition, activities are designed for the more general reader to encourage reading, inculcate the reading habit, develop and broaden reading skills, and encourage the proper use and care of books.

All parish libraries carry out extensive programmes of activities for children over the summer holidays. The main activities include music appreciation, a wide variety of craft projects, and reading projects including a National Reading Competition, all designed to facilitate the learning process.

*National Reading Competition.* This was begun in 1988 to coincide with the 40th anniversary of the Jamaica Library Service. The competitors are elected from Parish Reading Competition where contestants are required to read, assimilate and answer questions on between twelve to twenty books, selected for specific age groups and chosen by librarians and read in a two to three week period. The National Competition attracts a further reading of four books over a one-week period with another oral question and answer period including a summary of the four books, which is televised to the nation, before a panel of judges.

Poster competition, at exhibitions and competitions, story hour programmes, all have been an integral part of the programme of bringing books and children together, in an effort to develop good reading tastes. Story hour programmes have also been supplemented and supported by video expositions of books in the Library, music and games. These support mechanisms encourage the individuals to read material about what they have seen and heard.

*Community information service,* geared toward the common man is in operation at two rural parish libraries – in St. James (1986) and St. Ann (1989). It is hoped to extend the service to all parishes. The service was made possible through a Unesco pilot project, and demonstrates a positive effort to make the traditional information function of the library become more cognizant of, and conform to the level of the daily necessities of the society.

It supports the JAMAL publications which links reading material to relevant needs and interests of the common man and extends these. The service is operated from a room near the entrance to the individual library which is solely dedicated to that purpose. The information provided is adopted to the needs and capabilities of the users and is available to all persons and not only registered readers. This dynamic approach to accessing information embodies identifying and recognizing needs and collecting, organizing and packaging information in the most appropriate forms for specific client needs.

## **Conclusion**

If a library is to serve its clientele, it should assess in concrete terms its delivery service to its users. Although in developing countries, economic constraints will undoubtedly hinder the provision of some services to users, yet much can be done in individualizing service.

Third World librarianship necessitates the application of resourcefulness. A World Bank survey of educational research reports shows that industrial or developed countries invested in 1980 fifty times more per pupil than did the thirty-six countries with per capita incomes below \$265. Investment in educational activity does not by itself determine the efficiency or effectiveness of the educational system. Library and information resources become important from the point of view of their tangible contribution to the society as a whole through an active programme of dissemination of information.

Above all, there needs to be initiative, creativity and innovation in bringing together resources and opportunities into successful undertakings. Such initiative can only come from the human agents, the information facilitators.

A poor economic climate, foreign currency restrictions, exchange rate fluctuations and escalating book and journal prices is a heavy imposition on library and information services in the English-speaking Caribbean, but social conditions have created an extraordinary need for library and information services. Indeed there is a substantial unsatisfied demand for such services in all the territories. The Library services will benefit from increasing support if there is widespread awareness of their potential contribution to development.



## Los Recursos Bibliotecarios en América Latina Panorama general.

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### Resumen

Los países latinoamericanos conforman una región que lucha por un desarrollo económico, social y cultural que le permita salir de la crisis en que se encuentra para poder ofrecer a sus habitantes una vida más digna y más justa. En el campo de las bibliotecas se manifiestan los contrastes económicos que se dan en los demás aspectos del desarrollo de la región y aunque aún falta conciencia sobre el valor de la biblioteca como elemento de desarrollo y no se cuenta con los recursos económicos necesarios para mejorar los servicios, son muchos los logros que se han tenido en los últimos años: Se ha avanzado en la formación de recursos humanos con el establecimiento de escuelas de biblioteconomía en casi todos los países de la región; la planeación y cooperación han llevado a un mejoramiento de las bibliotecas públicas, universitarias y especializadas, se ha incrementado el número y la importancia de las asociaciones de bibliotecarios.

Es así que los recursos bibliotecarios en América Latina cada día cobran mayor importancia como apoyo para el desarrollo del alfabetismo, el conocimiento, la investigación y el desarrollo general de sus países.

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Las naciones latinoamericanas por su historia, por su cultura y por la semejanza de sus problemas contemporáneos conforman una región que lucha por un desarrollo económico y social que le permita salir de la crisis en que se encuentra para poder ofrecer a sus habitantes una vida más digna y más justa. Desde el punto de vista económico las naciones latinoamericanas pertenecen a la categoría de países en desarrollo y sus bibliotecas reflejan marcadamente esta designación. Pero a pesar de la aguda crisis económica y los serios problemas sociales por los que está pasando, el proceso de renovación y modernización de América Latina es evidente y esto se refleja necesariamente en sus actividades educativas, culturales y en sus bibliotecas. Se puede decir que la mayoría de los países de la región, especialmente Brasil, Argentina, Venezuela, Colombia y México, son países de contrastes en los que el desarrollo y el subdesarrollo coexisten. En el campo de la Bibliotecología se pueden encontrar bibliotecas totalmente automatizadas, con terminales conectadas a los bancos de información internacionales y bibliotecas con las necesidades técnicas más elementales.

En 1960 Carlos Víctor Penna dijo que “a pesar de la similitud que en muchos aspectos ofrecen los países que integran la América Latina sus características particulares son a veces tan distintas que limitan en cierta forma las comparaciones que requieren estudios de esta naturaleza. El mismo problema del analfabetismo cuyos índices señalan las posibilidades de la acción bibliotecaria es marcadamente variable entre unos países y otros”.<sup>1</sup> Este problema social ha mejorado notoriamente en los 30 años que han transcurrido y “se ha producido un saludable efecto en las bibliotecas creando un mercado para sus recursos y servicios”, por ejemplo Penna señalaba tasas de analfabetismo del 12 al 19 %, porcentaje este último que ya no se presenta en ningún país de la región. Actualmente encontramos desde el 2.2% de analfabetismo en Cuba, hasta un 45% en Guatemala y un 78% en Haití.<sup>2</sup> La tasa de escolaridad media es también variable en cada país, pero en América Latina aún no pasa del nivel primario.

Otras particularidades externas que inciden en los servicios bibliotecarios son: la extensión geográfica, las dificultades de comunicación, la densidad de población por km<sup>2</sup> (19 habitantes por km<sup>2</sup>) si bien hay grandes desequilibrios en la distribución de la población que cada vez se concentra más en zonas urbanas; así México tiene una cuarta parte de su población en el Valle de México, Buenos Aires la tercera parte y en Brasil se concentra en el litoral. Lo anterior hace que el crecimiento urbano sea muy alto. Se calcula que ahora la población rural es del 40% y la urbana del 60%. Otro aspecto es el crecimiento de la población, en 1980 América Latina tenía 361 millones de habitantes, en 1985 ascendieron a 405 millones de los cuales 235 millones 274 mil son menores de 24 años. Este problema afecta todos los aspectos de los servicios bibliotecarios: los usuarios, los acervos, su organización y renovación, los hábitos de lectura e intereses de niños y adultos. También hay que tener en cuenta la variedad de necesidades que los gobiernos tiene que atender antes que los servicios bibliotecarios, como son los servicios de educación, de salud, agua, electricidad, drenaje, caminos, etc. Además se encuentra que en muchos países ha habido un alto grado de centralismo en la toma de decisiones "todo debe ser decidido en la capital" y poco o nada se deja a la iniciativa local.

Al hablar del desarrollo bibliotecario en América Latina hay que tener en mente ciertos factores comunes a todos los países que tienen un valor para determinar el grado de avance de las bibliotecas de la región.

Estos factores son:

*Falta de conciencia sobre el valor de las bibliotecas y escasez de recursos asignados.* Aunque se puede afirmar que en los países latinoamericanos no existe aún una concientización por parte de las autoridades y la sociedad sobre la importancia de las bibliotecas y sus servicios y que por tanto no reciben el apoyo gubernamental y los recursos económicos suficientes para contar con la infraestructura necesaria para su buen funcionamiento, en las últimas décadas se ha contado con un mayor apoyo pues es indiscutible que las actividades bibliotecarias y de información han crecido, los servicios se han mejorado y ampliado, se ha registrado un adelanto evidente en todo tipo de bibliotecas (con excepción de las escolares) y las diferentes comunidades a las que se sirve han demostrado mayor interés por los servicios bibliotecarios.

El incremento en la mayoría de los países latinoamericanos de las bibliotecas públicas, universitarias y especializadas es realmente notorio y aunque es lamentable no poder proporcionar cifras que comprueben esta afirmación basta decir que Penna señalaba que en 1960 había cerca de 7 mil bibliotecas en la región según estimación de la OEA y que en la actualidad sólo en Brasil hay cerca de 19 mil y México cuenta con 5 mil. Por otro lado muchos de nosotros hemos sido testigos del desarrollo de las bibliotecas en nuestros países y del espacio cultural que ocupan.

En cuanto al desarrollo que han tenido los diferentes tipos de bibliotecas se puede decir que fuera de las escolares, todas han mejorado y ampliado sus servicios y crecido en número.

Las bibliotecas universitarias que ocupan el segundo lugar en excelencia de organización y servicios, sólo superadas por las especializadas, se encuentran en una etapa de desarrollo muy importante. En la mayoría de los países se tiende a la creación de sistemas de bibliotecas universitarias y a la centralización y coordinación de actividades y procesos dentro de cada universidad. En Brasil ésto empieza a darse después de la Reforma Universitaria de 1972. En Venezuela el Sistema Nacional de Servicios de Bibliotecas e Información (SINASBI) coordina el sistema bibliotecario nacional dentro del cuál están comprendidas las bibliotecas universitarias que han podido aplicar técnicas modernas para su mejor organización y funcionamiento, en Argentina existe la Red Nacional de Bibliotecas Universitarias (RENBU) y en Colombia el Instituto Colombiano para el Fomento de la Educación Superior (ICFES) coordina el Sistema de Información para la Educación Superior. En México, si bien no existe aún

un sistema coordinador de las bibliotecas universitarias, las Secretaría de Educación Pública y la Asociación Nacional de Universidades e Instituciones de Educación Superior (ANUIES) están llevando a cabo actividades que permitan una mayor comunicación y cooperación entre las bibliotecas universitarias del país. En Cuba se ha organizado una Red de Bibliotecas Universitarias coordinadas por la Dirección de Información del Ministerio de Educación Superior. Como se puede ver éstas tendencias tiene como finalidad apoyar con mayor eficiencia las tareas de docencia, investigación y difusión de la cultura.

En relación con las bibliotecas especializadas, Penna decía en 1960 "El desarrollo más notable alcanzado por las bibliotecas de América Latina lo registran las bibliotecas especializadas. En virtud de las necesidades de investigación en todos los campos, especialmente en los de técnica y de la ciencia, estas bibliotecas se han multiplicado, cuentan con adecuados recursos y muchas de ellas resultan buenos exponentes de organización y eficiencia"<sup>3</sup> y esto es válido para la actualidad, las bibliotecas y los centros de información que funcionan en los campos de la agricultura, la medicina, la energía nuclear y eléctrica, el petróleo, etc. son ejemplos de competencia y adelanto.

Las bibliotecas públicas o populares han corrido con diferente fortuna en los países de América latina, mientras que en Colombia, Venezuela, Argentina, Brasil, México y Cuba entre otros, se han desarrollado sistemas de bibliotecas públicas eficientes, otros no han logrado todavía contar con un buen servicio de este tipo de bibliotecas, Emir Suaiden dice que esto pasa porque no existe una concientización real por parte de las autoridades y del pueblo en cuanto a la importancia de la biblioteca pública y de su relación viva con la comunidad. Lo que existe es un esfuerzo por parte del profesional bibliotecario en su intento de cambiar esta situación y que sin duda hay muchas barreras que vencer. La falta de una política adecuada aliada a la permanente carencia de recursos financieros para esta área han provocado un serio problema ya que la mayor parte de la población latinoamericana no ha adquirido aún el hábito de la lectura, sigue siendo una sociedad con más tradición oral que textual.

Actualmente la demanda de material de lectura en las bibliotecas públicas es muy grande porque funcionan como bibliotecas escolares, el desarrollo demográfico está formado por un gran porcentaje de niños y jóvenes ya alfabetizados que necesitan estos servicios para apoyar su educación formal e imponen un esfuerzo sistemático y sin precedentes. Las bibliotecas públicas son el lugar de estudio de esos jóvenes que no tienen en su casa un lugar adecuado para estudiar y es por eso que es una situación común en todos los países de América Latina que los libros de las bibliotecas públicas sean poco solicitado para préstamo a domicilio. De allí la importancia de unas buenas instalaciones. Las bibliotecas públicas han mejorado notoriamente en Brasil por la actividad desarrollada por el Instituto Nacional del Libro, están floreciendo en Venezuela por la coordinación que lleva a cabo el Instituto Autónomo, Biblioteca Nacional y de Servicios Bibliotecarios y destacan los servicios que prestan a la comunidad en todos sus niveles nacional, estatal y municipal. En México durante el gobierno pasado se desarrolló el Programa Nacional de Bibliotecas Públicas que permitió que en seis años se abrieran 3047 bibliotecas en todo el país. Cuba y Colombia son también países que han apoyado y fortalecido los servicios de sus bibliotecas públicas.

Sobre este punto podemos concluir que si bien todavía falta mucho por hacer, son muchos los logros obtenidos.

*Formación de recursos humanos.* Uno de los progresos más firmes y valiosos de la profesión es el establecimiento de escuelas de bibliotecología y ciencias de la información en todos los países de América Latina, menos Haití y Honduras. Los 19 países restantes cuentan con una o varias escuelas de la especialidad. De acuerdo con la *International guide to library and information science education*, publicado por IFLA, en América Latina hay 73 escuelas de biblioteconomía distribuidas como sigue:



PAIS	No. DE ESCUELAS	OBSERVACIONES
1. Argentina	13	1 Curso de Maestría
2. Bolivia	1	
3. Brasil	31	6 Cursos de Maestría y 1 de Doctorado
4. Chile	1	
5. Colombia	4	
6. Costa Rica	1	
7. Cuba	1	1 Curso de Maestría
8. Ecuador*		
9. El Salvador	1	
10. Guatemala	1	
11. México	7	3 Cursos de Maestría
12. Nicaragua	1	
13. Panamá	1	
14. Paraguay	1	
15. Perú	2	
16. Puerto Rico	1	1 Curso de Maestría
17. República Dominicana*	1	
18. Uruguay	1	
19. Venezuela	3	1 Curso de Maestría
	<hr/> 73	<hr/> 14 Cursos de Posgrado

\* Datos no tomados de la guía de IFLA

De acuerdo con los datos proporcionados por las escuelas, hay una marcada feminización de la profesión, pues la mayoría de los estudiantes inscritos está compuesta por mujeres.

También encontramos que la enseñanza de la bibliotecología en América Latina se ha normalizado, los estudios de licenciatura que ofrecen la mayoría de las escuelas tienen una duración promedio de cuatro años. Las maestrías generalmente son en bibliotecología y ciencias de la información y duran entre dos y tres años. Todos los estudios están aprobados por el órgano oficial de educación de cada país y algunos regulados por ley como es el curriculum mínimo que se sigue en Brasil a partir de agosto de 1982 dictado por el Conselho Federal de Educação. La curricula de las escuelas es más uniforme y la enseñanza se ocupa ya de cuestiones de automatización, planeación, biblioteconomía comparada, redes y sistemas, perspectivas de la profesión.

Un problema al que se enfrenta la mayoría de las escuelas es la falta de maestros de tiempo completo, lo que sin duda incide en la calidad de la enseñanza. Gracias al funcionamiento de estas escuelas se ha formado el personal profesional con el que se cuenta hoy en América Latina. Además de aquellos que estudiaron en países extranjeros, especialmente Inglaterra y Estados Unidos. En esos países se formaron los doctores de la profesión que hay en Brasil, México, Costa Rica, Argentina, etc.

Desgraciadamente no podemos dar el número de profesionistas que tenemos, pero sólo en Brasil se habla de más de 20.000 bibliotecarios.

*Legislación.* Existen ya en la mayoría de los países leyes relacionadas de menos con algún aspecto de la biblioteconomía, como son las del depósito legal, el derecho de autor, el reconocimiento de la profesión, la creación de sistemas nacionales de bibliotecas y de servicios de información, la ética profesional, etc. Así tenemos que en países como Cuba, Colombia, Pa-

namá, y Brasil por ley se reconoce a los bibliotecarios como profesionales y se regula la profesión estableciendo que todos los cargos de dirección de bibliotecas y de puestos profesionales deben ser ejercidos por bibliotecarios profesionales.

La existencia de estas leyes está plenamente justificada porque responden a una determinada necesidad social, pero el problema está en que muchas de esas disposiciones no se cumplen, sucediendo ésto aún en países como Brasil que se ha distinguido en la lucha por el reconocimiento y respeto de la profesión. La invasión del trabajo bibliotecario por profesionistas de otras especialidades, ingenieros, sociólogos, abogados, sigue siendo una práctica común en nuestro medio y por tanto un punto prioritario y preocupante de estudio para investigadores y para formación de recursos humanos.

*Planeación y cooperación.* Si bien la biblioteconomía latinoamericana se ha caracterizado por su individualismo, lentamente ha ido caminando hacia una etapa de unificación, de integración y de cooperación. La cooperación está siendo reconocida como una manera de trabajar eficientemente con escasos recursos. También se trabaja ya en varios países siguiendo planes o programas de desarrollo bibliotecario que han llevado al mejoramiento de los servicios. Podemos mencionar el desarrollo de la Red de Bibliotecas Públicas en Brasil coordinada por el Instituto Nacional del Libro, el Programa de Desarrollo de Bibliotecas Públicas y Escolares de Venezuela dirigido por el Instituto Autónomo Biblioteca Nacional, el desarrollo del Sistema de Información para la Educación Superior, impulsado por el ICFES, y del Sistema de Bibliotecas Públicas auspiciado por COLCULTURA en Colombia; en Cuba funcionan las Redes de Bibliotecas Escolares y la de Bibliotecas Públicas; la Red de Bibliotecas Públicas en Nicaragua y el Programa Nacional de Bibliotecas Públicas en México a partir de 1983.

También existen proyectos de cooperación regional como el de la región andina y se participa en sistemas de información internacionales como el INIS, AGRIS Y ASFA. Pero ciertamente, aunque hay estos planes nacionales y se participa en estos sistemas internacionales de información, todavía en la región cuenta mucho la “voluntad política” para el avance y el éxito de estas actividades.

*Escasez de información estadística.* Hay una carencia generalizada de información sobre bibliotecas y servicios de información que hacen difíciles los estudios cuantitativos o comparativos. La falta de estadísticas bibliotecarias confiables y publicadas con regularidad es un hecho común en América Latina. Esta información es imprescindible para cualquier estudio preliminar sobre planeación bibliotecaria y un auxiliar valioso para la ejecución de cualquier plan destinado a extender y mejorar los servicios. En este aspecto no hemos avanzado, basta consultar el *Anuario Estadístico* de UNESCO para darnos cuenta de la poca seriedad con que se informa sobre las bibliotecas de la región. Por ejemplo en el *Anuario* de 1987, Argentina informa sólo tener 63 bibliotecas especializadas y Costa Rica una universitaria.

*Influencia extranjera, Investigación y Literatura Bibliotecaria Latinoamericana.* La biblioteconomía latinoamericana ha seguido modelos extranjeros a lo largo de los años en que se ha desarrollado. Nuestra profesión, hasta el presente, ha sido muy dependiente de la biblioteconomía extranjera en especial de la norteamericana, aunque en los últimos años se ha dejado sentir la influencia inglesa, numerosos bibliotecarios han hecho sus estudios en esos países, se usan las reglas de catalogación angloamericanas, las clasificaciones Dewey y Library of Congress, la automatización está fuertemente influida por MARC y los avances tecnológicos y administrativos provienen de esos países, estos factores confirman lo que un colega llama “un cuadro de dependencia intelectual que nos ha enajenado a una relación acrítica y lo que es más serio nos ha impedido ser productivos y ser creativos en la búsqueda de soluciones propias a problemas que nos son propios”.<sup>4</sup>

La escasez de investigación y teoría bibliotecarias es notoria, Juárez dice que “no podemos pretender que se nos respete y considere como profesionistas autónomos si no cumplimos

mos más acabadamente con los requisitos intelectuales y aún epistemológicos o científicos que exige esa condición”.<sup>5</sup> De hecho no habido espacio para la investigación y esta sólo se ha realizado de manera esporádica y fragmentaria con resultados débiles orientados a la práctica inmediata. Casi es inexistente el cuestionamiento sobre lo que estamos haciendo y el porqué y el cómo se está haciendo.

En la actualidad únicamente en México y Argentina existen centros dedicados exclusivamente a la investigación, estos son el Centro Universitario de Investigaciones Bibliotecológicas (CUIB) de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México y el Centro de Investigaciones Bibliotecológicas de la Universidad de Buenos Aires.

Quizá producto de lo dicho antes es la carencia de literatura profesional en español y portugués. No sólo es necesario traducir textos de reconocido valor sino sobre todo estimular la creación y publicación de textos de la localidad. Todavía hay una excesiva dependencia de obras de los Estados Unidos y de Inglaterra y no hemos sido capaces de hacer nuestras propias herramientas sobre todo para la enseñanza; quizá ésto suceda menos en Brasil pero en la América Hispana, con excepción de Cuba, en las escuelas se usan libros extranjeros que describen condiciones que difieren grandemente de las que prevalecen en nuestros países.

Esto no quiere decir que no exista literatura en español y portugués, contamos con varias revistas que ya tienen permanencia y son producto de las asociaciones o de las escuelas. Otra importante fuente de publicaciones son las memorias de los congresos, jornadas y seminarios, indispensables para el estudio de la bibliotecología regional pero difíciles de conseguir fuera de su país de origen.

Hacen falta muchas obras de referencia.

*El estatus del bibliotecario.* Litton afirma en su ensayo que “aunque el número de profesionistas en América Latina sigue creciendo, sus salarios y su estatus no han mejorado proporcionalmente. La exagerada inferioridad de la biblioteconomía en relación con otras profesiones ha disminuído en ciertos países pero sentimos que la mayoría de los bibliotecarios latinoamericanos consideran su situación inferior especialmente cuando comparan salarios y estatus con sus colegas de otros campos”.<sup>6</sup> Un aspecto que incide en este problema es el incuestionable predominio femenino en la profesión que se refleja en los bajos salarios. En algunos países los puestos de bibliotecario no son considerados profesionales.

Sin embargo el profesionalismo ha avanzado en algunos países, como en Brasil, Argentina y Cuba, como resultado del mejoramiento de la educación bibliotecaria y la ampliación de sus actividades culturales. Empieza a cambiar la imagen profesional aunque lentamente.

*Las asociaciones profesionales.* Se puede afirmar que todos los países de América Latina cuentan ya con un tipo de organización profesional a través de la cual los bibliotecarios intercambian ideas, se reúnen y cobran fuerza por medio de la unidad. Así tenemos el siguiente cuadro\*:

\*Fuente: Litton y Seminario Latinoamericano.



<i>País</i>	<i>Número de asociaciones</i>
1. Argentina	18
2. Bolivia	3
3. Brasil	25 1 federación
4. Chile	1
5. Colombia	9
6. Costa Rica	1
7. Cuba*	2
8. Ecuador*	1
9. Honduras	1
10. Guatemala	1
11. México	7
12. Nicaragua	2
13. Panamá	1
14. Paraguay*	1
15. Perú*	3
16. Puerto Rico*	2
17. República Dominicana	1
18. Uruguay*	3
19. Venezuela	2
	<hr/>
	84

Existen también asociaciones regionales: AIBDA, ACURIL y ALEBCI. La mayoría de las asociaciones y colegios fueron creados en las décadas de los 50 y 60 como resultado de las actividades de la UNESCO y la OEA para el desarrollo de los servicios bibliotecarios y de documentación de la región.

Son las asociaciones las que empiezan y continúan organizando jornadas, congresos, seminarios y cursos de capacitación y educación continua y es en esos foros dónde se cuestionan y exponen los problemas bibliotecarios y la situación que guardan las bibliotecas en cada país. Las asociaciones han trabajado con una serie de limitaciones de tipo económico, organizativo, etc. que han impedido su mayor desarrollo. Sin embargo es mucho lo que han hecho por la profesión, han trabajado en el campo de la normalización, de la legislación, de la ética profesional, han publicado y fomentado la investigación.

Varias de las asociaciones están afiliadas a IFLA, cada vez más participan en las reuniones internacionales y la presencia de América Latina cobra más fuerza dentro de la Federación.

En 1987 se celebró en Caracas el Primer Seminario Latinoamericano de Bibliotecarios y Profesionales Afines, auspiciado por IFLA.

*El impacto de la tecnología.* El uso de los avances tecnológicos en los servicios bibliotecarios, especialmente los adelantos de la computación es un proceso que ha estado introduciendo cambios profundos en el mundo de las bibliotecas y centros de información. Estos cambios son justificados en la medida en que vivimos inmersos en una sociedad que cada vez más se acostumbra a las computadoras y al manejo de la información por medio de ellas. En la mayoría de los países latinoamericanos los trámites bancarios, las reservaciones en los aviones, el manejo de cuentas de luz, teléfono, impuestos se hacen ya por medio de computadoras. Las bibliotecas como sistemas de información requieren de una actualización permanente en cuanto a procedimientos, métodos y recursos técnicos de que se valen para cumplir con sus metas. Por tanto para organizar y hacer accesible con más éxito la información, se hace necesario planear nuevas soluciones que permitan no sólo más eficiencia en el manejo

de esa información, sino lograr una mayor eficacia en tiempo, costos y procedimientos. No hay que olvidar también la importancia que tiene la imagen de una biblioteca ante una sociedad dinámica y cambiante.

El desarrollo de la industria de la informática en algunos países de América Latina como Brasil y México, entre otros, ha hecho que le presencia y el uso de las computadoras en la educación superior, en la investigación y las bibliotecas sea ya una realidad que no puede soslayarse. Si a eso añadimos el avance de las telecomunicaciones y la presencia de satélites artificiales como el Morelos en México y el Brasilsat en Brasil, es notorio y acelerado el proceso de automatización de algunos sectores de información de la región.

El crecimiento de cursos de capacitación de recursos humanos en el área de la informática ha sido extraordinario en todos los niveles y la tendencia es que se incrementen en calidad y cantidad. También el impacto de las nuevas tecnologías ha sido motivo de numerosos seminarios, congresos y coloquios en toda el área.

Otro aspecto interesante es el uso de softwares tanto internacionales como MINI-ISIS y MICROISIS y el interés por desarrollar softwares propios y que respondan a las necesidades nacionales; en México tenemos LIBRUNAM, SIABUC, LOGICAT, etc. MICROISIS se ha generalizado mucho en la región promovido por UNESCO. Ha cobrado importancia la creación de bancos de información que satisfagan las necesidades locales y se ocupen de la información bibliográfica, de datos estadísticos, de patentes generados en el país. En varios países se está trabajando con intensidad en estos bancos.

También se maneja en la región el correo electrónico que posibilita el intercambio de mensajes entre usuarios con las redes nacionales e internacionales de información; así como el uso de CDROM para proyectos nacionales y regionales.

Sin embargo, hay que reconocer que América latina aún no entra en la era de la información, tal como se concibe en los países avanzados, la información no se ha convertido todavía en un recurso estratégico para el desarrollo, así vemos que a pesar de los grandes avances que ha habido en la bibliotecología latinoamericana aún hay muchas bibliotecas que carecen de recursos técnicos elementales y desconocen la organización y los servicios modernos de información, éstas coexisten junto a bibliotecas que viven en el mundo de la electrónica, la telemática, la revolución de la información, están conectadas a los bancos internacionales de información y tiene a su disposición computadoras para la organización de sus servicios, la desigualdad es una realidad y se da en la mayoría de los países de la región.

Tal vez el punto clave del futuro de la biblioteca en América Latina sea la actitud del bibliotecario ante el usuario, ante la comunidad y ante la educación.

En conclusión, podemos afirmar, que a pesar de las carencias señaladas, los recursos bibliotecarios con que cuenta la América Latina para apoyar el alfabetismo, el conocimiento, la investigación y el desarrollo, cada día se incrementan y adquieren mayor importancia.

## Notas

1. Carlos Víctor Penna, *La bibliotecología latinoamericana*, Tucumán, Universidad Nacional. Biblioteca Central 1960. p. 13.
2. *Anuario Estadístico 1987*. Paris, UNESCO, 1987.
3. Penna *op.cit.* p. 242.
4. Alvaro Quijano Solís. Acción de las asociaciones profesionales en el desarrollo de la biblioteconomía mexicana, en *2a. Conferencia Binacional de Bibliotecas de las Californias*. 12 oct. 1985 p. 9.
5. Roberto Juárez. El bibliotecario hoy y la crisis profesional. *Bol. Inf. ABGRA* no. 10, en mar. 1987. p. 17.

6. Gaston Litton y Richard Krzys. Latin American Librarianship: an area study, en *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*. New York, Dekker, 1986. v. 40, suppl. 5 p. 258.

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## Public Libraries, Information and Citizenship

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### Abstract

Public libraries in developing countries are involved with the provision of community information services to the general public. These services intend to make people aware of the value and need of information, and to motivate its use. The paper describes, briefly, a project developed in São Paulo, Brazil, to reach low income population and to help each individual's fulfillment of his citizenship. At long range, community information services pretend to promote the use of information as a culture attitude.

In Latin America and the Caribbean many regional networks such as LILACS (Literature on Health Sciences by authors of the Region), have been developed in recent years, and access to databases is becoming a common practice in universities, research centers and main business corporations. This shows that at least scientists, industrialists, and businessmen are aware of the value of information for scientific, technological, and economic development.

On the other hand, the majority of the population ignores the value of information for the solving of daily problems, for social mobility, and for participation in a democratic society. This gap between the so called elite of a country and the common people can be compared to that one existing between developed and developing countries. Information appears again, as one of the indicators of this gap.

Public libraries in developing countries have been trying to carry out community information systems as a means of spreading the use of information as a cultural attitude. Venezuela is the country where community involvement has been emphasized and where the mentioned service plays an important role in the public library system (1).

The lack of articles on community information services in library journals, sometimes the most accessible source of information in our countries, was a major obstacle for my identification of other experiences in the Region. This same fact is the probable cause of a single citation to a country in the Region, Jamaica, in the paper "Rural community information services" (2).

Literature on the subject may be scarce, but not the care for it, as stated in the Seminar on public libraries, held in Caracas, in 1982. In this meeting, a main proposal was the provision of alternative models for the organization of community information systems for public libraries (manuals and guidelines) (3).

As a contribution to the subject, this paper describes some of the problems affecting the use of information by low income citizens and mentions the project "Citizen Information System", developed in São Paulo to reach its population, specially those inhabitants living at the marginal areas of the city (4).

### **Unknown value, unknown need, in an unknown place**

Polke (5) carried out a research study with the aim of verifying the flow of information in a low income quarter (bairro) in Belo Horizonte, capital of the State of Minas Gerais. She found out that information was obtained mainly, through friends, neighbours and relatives. Employment was one of the main worries of the local population, who also felt that information on jobs was hard to be obtained. People felt helpless before legislation, thus discouraged to fight for their rights. The author ends up stating that the lack of information was the cause of the low level of participation in community organizations.

Santos (6), in 1984, carried out another research concerning the needs of information of Northeastern migrants arriving in São Paulo and Brasília. Work in the big city was their main motivation for migration. Some of the following results are pertinent to our theme:

- 77–82% of the interviewed had not looked for information on Brasília or São Paulo before their departure. This represents that they did not have a need for information even in the situation of starting a new life in a strange and unfamiliar place;
- the few ones who looked for information had as their interest job opportunities, friends, and relatives;
- there was a lack of knowledge on the meaning and objectives of a library; most of the migrants had “heard of it”, but they did not know “what is was”.

Both researches acknowledge that information circulates mainly, “by word of mouth and personal recommendation” (2). Only informal sources (friends, family and relatives) were used, as also noted by Kempson (2). Thus, the situation in rural Africa is similar to that in some urban areas in Brasil. The explanation is simple, oral culture also prevails in Brasil where literacy rate is around 73,4%. Besides, Santo’s research was carried out among rural migrants and Polke’s in an urban marginal area in which people have problems similar to those of a rural population.

Community information service, as a formal channel, is supposed to provide information to a population that needs it for participation in a democratic society, for breaking away a condition of social alienation, and for an upward social mobility. However, this same population does not understand the value and advantages of information for the solving of daily problems, the reason why they do not feel a need for it.

Let us compare the situation of a library holding a community information service to that of a hospital with a service for a specific disease. A person may be sick, without knowing it, but at the first symptom of any disease, she knows where to go because health services (hospital and similar) have a known meaning and use (5). A person may have a need for information without being aware of it, but if she gets to realize the need, instead of going to libraries or to any organization with a similar service, she will look for informal sources.

In both cases, the knowledge of the need is helpful because it represents the possible cure of a disease or the solution of a problem. The specific services are available, at the hospital it will be used, at the library it might be used if a friend had heard of it. In both cases, libraries and hospitals have anticipated a need.

As the service in the library is neither the product of a demand nor the meeting of a need, one may say that a cultural elite is imposing an unneeded service to the gross mass of the population. In this case, however, the offer intends to create a demand, as it often occurs in cultural activities.

Presuming that community information service, or a structured formal information service, is needed, one may question the reason for having them in libraries.

First, public libraries in developing countries are, sometimes, the only institutions that recognize information as a right and a need. They are also willing to provide the service



intended at the satisfaction of this need. Second, libraries are associated with the learned society, as "a place for books" (6), a place where students search for knowledge or help to do their homeworks, as a place that solves some of the educational problems of the population. In most of the cases, the library is an institution trusted by people in search of knowledge. Third, libraries play an important role in the educational process by making people aware of a need and motivating the use of information, a new knowledge and a new ability. Fourth, where resources are scarce, they must be concentrated; so, it is rational to use existing buildings and services that have already a good image concerning transmission of knowledge.

### **The project citizen information system: known value, known need in a known place**

Many factors have to be considered when planning a community information service: the use or non use of information, the flow of information in a community and many others mentioned in the literature (2, 7, 8). It has also been described the causes that difficult or prevent the use of information, such as: educational and cultural backgrounds, ignorance of the value of information as a means of the improving social conditions, dispersion of existing information, complexity of its presentation, excess of information as produced by mass media, etc.

Many needs have been appointed in several researches: health services housing, transportation, education (7). In a big city as São Paulo, other needs have been identified. For the rural migrant living in urban marginal areas, it is essential information concerning not only labour and jobs – the attraction of the city, but also continuing education – to keep a job or to get a better job in a competitive society. Information concerning constitutional rights is also highly necessary in places where, by ignorance of their rights, people feel helpless and unprotected (5).

In São Paulo, there is already a community information service in the central library that is used mainly by people and organizations that already know the value of information and where to get it. Expressing their worry with this situation, the workers of the public library system, gathered in an assembly, voted for the implementation of an overall system to reach people in the existing 56 service points. The main objective of this system is to make available information aiming at each individual's fulfilment as a citizen, an information system to citizenship (8).

The working group formed to draft the project proposed an information network with centralized processing and decentralized input and retrieval of information. The sharing of information collected by each participating library is a way of maximizing the use of resources. This would enable the reutilization of a research, avoiding, thus, the duplication and dispersion of efforts.

Computers, besides efficiently storing and retrieving information (9), have another advantage, the attraction of a new technology for people unused to it. As escalators and elevators still attract and scare people, the computer terminal available for personal use may cause the same effect.

Furthermore, the computer is a tool for the user to become himself a provider of information, in an active participation. A user seeing "his" information on the screen, will surely tell friends and neighbours about it, thus promoting the use of the system.

Some of these positions may sound naive as common man is someway. But he is also gifted by that natural wisdom that is a part of the culture of every nation in the world, an sometimes of the universal culture. Proverb may have different formal expressions in each language but, intrinsically, they have the same meaning.

The participation of the community or its members as information sources would be an

evidence of people's supporting the system, the beginning of that active participation that can lead to political awareness. We would then witness the longed for "democratization of information", information for the community, of the community, and by it as well.

### **Organizational aspects**

The network is formed by:

- a central information agency, located at the main central library, that would coordinate the strategies for collection, control, storage and dissemination of information;
- participating units, branch libraries that would be responsible for cooperating in feeding the system, updating data, disseminating information, and for advertising the service to the communities to which they belong;
- coordinating body for the management of the system. It would be formed by a representative of the central unity, and two representatives of each zone of the city (a librarian and a member of the community). This body should choose a manager amongst its professional members.

### **Phases of the project**

The project consists of four phases: pilot project, the evaluation of it, expansion of the network to reach seven more libraries, and implementation of the whole network.

The project has already overpassed its preliminary phase when the existing information service and the information provided by branch libraries were evaluated. It has also been made a survey of all existing information centers and services in the city.

For being a pilot project from which depends the implementation of the network, it is worthy to describe briefly the first phase. It consists of the following:

- (1) input of the existing information in the central library;
- (2) initial implementation of the network in two branch libraries, and
- (3) access to two of the city data bases (legislation and directory for public services).

The libraries are located in two different zones of the city and reach communities of different social conditions. One of them is used only by children and adolescents, which calls for another project: the awareness of the use of information to citizenship from early childhood.

### **Pilot project: implementation steps**

The following steps should be undertaken:

1. Development of a bibliographical collection for support;
2. Training of the staff on: data input, user's interview; recovery of information from the city data bases;
3. Data entry;
4. Installation of equipment and furniture in the participating libraries;
5. Maintenance of the files and feeding of information;
6. Dissemination of information;
7. Marketing of the service. It is the most important feature for creating a demand, making people aware of the need for information and motivating people to use it. In São Paulo, the following aspects should be taken into consideration: oral culture background, flow of information through informal channels, the amount of residences with a radio set (96%), the radio as one of the main sources of information for housewives, the interaction with community popular groups (religious, political, labor and minority grassroot organizations) (10), children as main library users and "as a medium of contact with adults" (11).
8. Continuous evaluation.

This brief description of some of the aspects of the project is a very simple contribution to the subject. Information services in public libraries aiming to reach those individuals in the local community who have a limited access to formal information resources could, at long range, promote a change in the cultural attitude of the population.

### Conclusion

As a true representative of the soul and the culture of our Region, Jose Marti, an outstanding statesman, has a right word for any effort to cope with problems in Latin America and the Caribbean: "My sling is David's" (12). In fact, motivating the use of information by the general public, as a cultural attitude, and consequently contributing for a democratic society is a gigantic educational task for a David in the society communication network: public libraries.

To some degree, in developing countries, the problem of giving a new meaning to public libraries, that of a community information center is present in library policies of many countries. In search of this new image, public libraries could profit from the sharing of information through a "center of information and documentation on library services in Latin American and the Caribbean in rural and marginal urban areas" (11). In this case, librarians know the value, have the need but do not have the service to answer their need – the proposed center – in contrast to special librarians who already have the regional networks they need.

The network LILACS was mentioned at the beginning of the paper to serve as an example of an achievement attained in the Region, in Health Sciences. Scientific and technological information represents for the development of Science and Technology, what the use of information by the general public represents for socio-cultural development, hence the importance of community information services.

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